



# Museums and Philosophy--Of Art, and Many Other Things. Part 1.

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## Museums and Philosophy—Of Art, and Many Other Things Part I

Ivan Gaskell\*  
*Bard Graduate Center*

The philosophical discussion of art is seemingly endless, whereas that of museums is scant indeed. My focus in this two-part article is on museums as a whole rather than art in museums. Museums, after all, deal with much more than art.

Why should philosophers be interested in museums? One reason is that museums remain significant generators and distributors of knowledge claims in a wide variety of fields of inquiry. This remains the case even though they may have been overshadowed in certain respects by other institutions of scholarship. Although few philosophers have addressed museums, many theorists have done so. Although much theorizing about museums has a Continental flavor, little is philosophically oriented. I shall not directly address the vast literature on museums by theorists of various persuasions, for a plethora of commentaries is already available. Instead, I offer discussions of philosophical issues concerning museums under three headings in Part 1—*Cultural Variety, Taxonomy, and Epistemology*—and a further three in Part 2—*Teleology, Ethics, and Therapeutics and Aesthetics*.

### I.1. *Cultural Variety*

Westerners use the terms *art* and *museum* in predominantly Western senses, but there is a difference between their respective implications. Western philosophers and scholars in other disciplines contest whether some, most, or all non-Western societies of very varied character have a concept of art. For our purposes, such discussions are only of immediate interest insofar as they affect our ability to understand museums. In contrast, most Western and other scholars agree that although there might have existed and in some societies yet exist collections of tangible things in some respects analogous to museums, as a concept the museum is in origin a product of the Western Enlightenment. We can take its paradigm to be the British Museum, London, founded in 1753. This is not to say that the variety of practices of currently existing museums worldwide is not considerable, but that all in some sense derive from Western models.

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\* Correspondence: Bard Graduate Center, 38 West 86th Street, New York, NY 10024, USA. Email: gaskell@bgc.bard.edu.

This is so even when one takes account of predecessor institutions. It is a commonplace that some Western museums and art galleries derive from predecessor institutions such as *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammern* (or cabinets of curiosities), princely and noble art collections, and ecclesiastical treasuries. Krzysztof Pomian has influentially traced this development in a broader context of Western practices dating from classical antiquity.<sup>1</sup> However, although some non-Western museums occupy the sites of predecessor institutions that could be seen as culturally characteristic of their societies, they derive from Western models that had been exported by Western colonizers, or adopted by Westernizing Indigenous elites. For instance, the Imperial Treasury and other parts of the Ottoman Topkapı Palace in Istanbul can be said to have functioned in part in the manner of a museum even before the redesignation of the palace as a museum in 1924 by the government of the new Republic of Turkey. That museum conformed to Western prototypes from the outset, and continues to do so. Although there were various princely and temple collections in India, the British introduced museums on their own model, the earliest and largest being the Indian Museum in Kolkata (Calcutta). It was founded in 1814 as the Oriental Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.<sup>2</sup> Kavita Singh and Saloni Mathur are researching colonial museums in India and their postcolonial transmutations.<sup>3</sup> The Western museum model—however varied it may be, especially in respect of collection types—has undergone and continues to undergo a wide range of transformations in postcolonial settings. Some are transformations of pre-existing institutions to reflect emergent postcolonial circumstances. One example is the Museum of New Zealand in Wellington, now called Te Papa Tongarewa, with a bilingual—English and te reo Māori—website.<sup>4</sup> Others reflect the communal concerns of new nation states, such as the National Museum of Vanuatu in Port Vila. There are also museums firmly anchored in Indigenous communities that are motors of cultural and social resurgence. Among the most remarkable is the U'mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay, British Columbia, Canada. This is the cultural center of the Kwakwaka'wakw people, whose traditional way of life was severely threatened by prohibitions imposed by colonial authorities. The potlatch ceremony (the ritual dispersal of goods) was banned between 1885 and 1951. Many masks and other regalia associated with potlatch were confiscated after a ceremony in 1921. The collection of sacred potlatch materials now in the U'mista Cultural Centre and the Nuyumbalees Cultural Center, Quadra Island, BC, were returned after years of petitioning and negotiation by the Kwakwaka'wakw from institutions including the Canadian Museum of Civilization (previously the National

<sup>1</sup> Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs, curieux: Paris-Venise, XVIe - XIIIe siècles* (Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1987) published in English translation as *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990)

<sup>2</sup> See Desmond Ray, *The India Museum 1801-1879* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> *No Touching, Spitting or Praying: Modalities of the Museum in South Asia*, ed. Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh (New Delhi: Routledge India, forthcoming). See also Kavita Singh, "Museums and Monuments" in *Mulk Raj Anand: Shaping the Indian Modern*, ed. Annapurna Garimella (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2005), and Kavita Singh, "Material Fantasy: The Museum in Colonial India" in *India: Art and Visual Culture, 1857-2007*, ed. Gayatri Sinha (Mumbai: Marg Publications and Bodhi Art Gallery, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/> (accessed July 25, 2011)

Museum of Man), Ottawa (now Gatineau, Québec); the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; and the George Gustav Heye Foundation's Museum of the American Indian, New York (now the National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC and New York). The restitution of cultural goods of their own societies is one of the most important aims of many postcolonial national and Indigenous museums. After the "[c]ollection and preservation of artifacts that represent different aspects of the cultures and history of the country," the second listed objective of the National Museum of Vanuatu is "[l]ocating collections of Vanuatu artifacts held overseas and establishing relationships with their care-taking institutions as a first step towards possible repatriation of items."<sup>5</sup>

Although most museums throughout the world adhere, broadly speaking, to a Western paradigm, their concerns vary considerably, and no difference is more extreme, and on occasion divisive, than that between so-called encyclopedic world museums (which are without exception in wealthy Western countries), and institutions in the developing world or Indigenous communities. This is a pressing ethical issue to which I shall return. My point here, however, is to draw attention to the wide variety of institutions that vary in their aims and methods in social and ethnic terms, but while often reflecting local cultural values, nonetheless adhere to a Western paradigm. Much discussion of museums is tacitly confined to overtly Western institutions, which James Clifford calls "majority museums," to the exclusion of what he calls (with non-derogatory intent) "tribal museums."<sup>6</sup> Rather than the terms used by Clifford, I prefer *hegemonic museums* and *subaltern museums* respectively. Any philosophical discussion of museums should take account of the entire cultural range of these institutions, or state why it should be confined to one or more in particular.

## 1.2. *Taxonomy*

In spite of a shared origin in the European Enlightenment, museums have developed in culturally varied ways in vastly differing societies—from the privileged, imperial encyclopedism of the British Museum, to the Indigenous persistence of the U'mista Cultural Centre. They also vary according to the material to which they attend. For instance, when founded in 1814, the Oriental Museum of the Asiatic Society in Kolkata was divided into two sections, one being archaeology, ethnology and technology, the other comprising geology and zoology; that is, the consequences of human activity in one, and of natural occurrences in the other. Things still living were, and remain,

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<sup>5</sup> Vanuatu Cultural Centre website (the National Museum is part of the Centre): [http://www.vanuatuculture.org/site-bm2/museum/050520\\_nationalmuseum.shtml](http://www.vanuatuculture.org/site-bm2/museum/050520_nationalmuseum.shtml) (accessed July 15, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> James Clifford, "Four Northwest Coastal Museums: Travel Reflections," in ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 212-54.

excluded.<sup>7</sup> The Indian Museum is divided into six sections: Art, Archaeology, Anthropology, Economic Botany, Geology, and Zoology.<sup>8</sup> The museum scholars' work was far from merely academic: the first superintendent of the Indian Museum, Nathaniel Wallich, and his colleagues were responsible for the successful introduction of the tea cultivar from China to India, with enormous economic consequences.

In nineteenth-century Kolkata we see a collecting institution progressively developing and establishing a taxonomy of material things. Similar developments were going on at much the same time in many other parts of the world. George Brown Goode, assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in charge of the United States National Museum in Washington, DC, analyzed and codified them in *Principles of Museum Administration* (1895). In his first axis of categorization, Goode describes six types of museums: "A. Museums of Art; B. Historical Museums; C. Anthropological Museums; D. Natural History Museums; E. Technological Museums; F. Commercial Museums." Goode's second axis of categorization concerns the character of museums by type rather than by field of inquiry: "G. National Museums; H. Local, Provincial, or City Museums; I. College and School Museums; J. Professional or Class Museums; K. Museums or Cabinets for special research owned by societies or individuals."<sup>9</sup> Thus Goode classifies the classifiers. With the exception of F, and a requirement to add a category of Indigenous or subaltern museums, this schema still obtains.<sup>10</sup>

This state of affairs raises a host of philosophical and other questions. First, is categorization of tangible things such as are found in museums an exclusively Western preoccupation? If not, how might schemata of categorization of tangible things vary among societies? Both Westerners and non-Westerners propose groupings other than those identified by Goode in order to harness the numinous characteristics of certain tangible things for intervention in the sacred realm, or for aesthetic understanding. Certainly, Westerners have distinguished, named, sorted, grouped, gathered, and

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<sup>7</sup> The East India Company Botanic Garden (now the Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Indian Botanic Garden), which also employed the first superintendent of the Oriental Museum, Nathaniel Wallich, remained and still remains an entirely separate institution.

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of the Indian Museum, and local popular beliefs and behavior regarding it—the *jadughar* ("House of Magic")—see Mark Elliott, "Side Effects: Looking, Touching, and Interacting in the Indian Museum, Kolkata," *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 18, 2006, pp. 63-75.

<sup>9</sup> George Brown Goode, *The Principles of Museum Administration* (New York: Coultas & Volans, 1895), p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 21. Commercial museums (of which the Philadelphia Commercial Museum was the prime example) have not survived: see Conn, pp. 115-50. By *subaltern*, following the usage of the term first coined by Antonio Gramsci, and established by a number of Indian historians, I refer to groups at a disadvantage to those exercising power within a society. It should be noted that *subaltern* includes many groups often referred to as *Indigenous*; that is, societies that have been in any given place longer than those who consequently came to dominate them. There is clearly significant overlap between subaltern and Indigenous groups, although the two are not coextensive. I use the more inclusive *subaltern* because it captures the feature that is relevant to this inquiry: the systematic and persistent subordination of the group in question. I follow the practice adopted by A.W. Eaton and myself in our chapter, "Do Subaltern Artifacts Belong in Art Museums?" *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, ed. James O. Young and Conrad Brunk (Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 235-267.

subsequently deployed many tangible things in order to make knowledge claims about both the things themselves and the emergent concepts their users have associated with them. These activities are the basis of much Western methodical thinking since classical antiquity. Is this method exclusively Western?

The most influential thinker in this field in recent years has been Michel Foucault. His most significant contribution to the discussion is his 1966 book, *Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*.<sup>11</sup> Foucault famously begins the book with a consideration that he had read in Jorge Luis Borges's essay, "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins" (*Otras Inquisiciones*, 1952) of a list of seemingly unrelated things that are grouped together in a "certain Chinese encyclopedia." Many scholars who believe all categorization to be arbitrary rather than derived from the accurate discernment of the particular qualities of things have cited this passage. While the question of the claims of empiricism versus those of idealism in this area remains pressing, the principal underlying danger in acceding wholly to Foucault's careful arguments is that they too readily subordinate all analysis of the treatment of tangible things to considerations of language. Foucault's contemporary, Jean Baudrillard, broadens the case to address what he terms the "system of objects."<sup>12</sup> Yet in spite of writing a book urging us to *Forget Foucault*,<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard's claims meet the case no more comprehensively than do Foucault's. Tangible things require a more complex and varied set of approaches than Baudrillard offers when discussing them in terms of their sign value superseding functional and exchange values.<sup>14</sup> Acknowledgement that the "linguistic turn" is long over may now be commonplace, yet the reduction of things to phenomena wholly subordinate to language, or to signs or texts, continues to affect scholarly discussion, often adversely.

Even before we consider the ways in which things are apportioned among various types of museums, we should recognize the fundamental distinction between those things that have found places within them, and those that have not. In acknowledging that there are some things that have, or yet might, find a place in a museum, and other things that most likely never shall, we should bear in mind that there are two kinds of collections of things: *representational* and *aesthetic*.<sup>15</sup> Representational museums aim to convey knowledge about things and the societies or places in which they originated. To serve this function, things should be typical of the area from which they come, of the species to which they belong (even if previously unrecognized or stipulated), or of the

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1966) published in English translation as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, Ltd., 1970).

<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des objets* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1968) published in English translation as *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London and New York: Verso, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Oublier Foucault* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1977) published in English translation as *Forget Foucault and Forget Baudrillard: An Interview with Sylvère Lotringer* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987).

<sup>14</sup> See also Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1973) published in English translation as *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> This discussion derives from Eaton and Gaskell, "Subaltern Artifacts," p. 244.

culture that produced them. In this way, representational museums treat the things they address as *specimens*. Goode's historical museums, anthropological museums, natural history museums, and technology museums are all examples of representational museums. Aesthetic institutions, on the other hand, seek to avoid artifacts that typify a society, place, or species. In contrast, they collect things that are in some way aesthetically extraordinary. They aim to highlight aesthetically exceptional features, treating the objects they address as *artworks*. Typically, although not invariably, decision-makers at aesthetic institutions assume the standards for aesthetic excellence to be self-evident. Further, although the aims of representational and aesthetic institutions are not necessarily incompatible, they often conflict. On representational criteria, anything could potentially find a place in a representational institution, though some things are far more likely to than others because—as we shall see—even representative institutions are selective and limited in the range of fields they address. Most obviously, contemporary ordinary things from the dominant culture within which a museum functions find little or no place within its collections, whereas things that might be ordinary in a foreign society, yet exotic from a domestic vantage point, might. In this way, contemporary supermarket packaged groceries that would be unremarkable in Tokyo find a place in the Children's Museum, Boston as specimens of an unfamiliar, foreign way of life. Clearly, those things unlikely to enter an aesthetic institution as aesthetically extraordinary, even though they might be eligible to enter a representational institution as specimens, constitute the largest category numerically. Things of many kinds outside the various museums vastly outnumber things within them, whether representational or aesthetic, or both. The very fact of selection for inclusion of even the most banal specimen confers special status on it as a museum object. Let us consider in more detail how this happens.

All museums contain two kinds of things: those that are part of their collection, and those that are not. Things that enter the collection do so through a practical ritual of accession, usually following the decision of a scholarly committee. Having been accepted, they are registered. This permanently changes their status, even if they might be subsequently deaccessioned by means of another practical ritual. This secular consecration consigns the thing to perpetual surveillance. All of its movements and its whereabouts—in storage, in a laboratory, on display, or on loan—are tracked and recorded. But first, it is given an identification number that never changes, however its description might be altered in the light of continuing scholarship. That number is literally inscribed upon it, marking it unequivocally as a museum object. This is so in the case both of human-made things, and things from the natural world. These acts—most visibly that of inscribing—set museum specimens and artworks apart from all other things in the world.

This transformation occurs within a schema comprising an ever-branching conceptual tree of knowledge. It begins with the major distinction between specimen and artwork, continues with the appropriate choice among Goode's six types of museum or their local, contemporary variants, and then by sub-category, usually represented by an individual museum department. From the level of department—such as, for instance, Herpetology within a natural history museum, or Sculpture within an art

museum—categorization follows in greater detail with ever nicer distinctions. In zoology or botany, these include place of origin and Linnaean designation by genus and species. For example, within Herpetology we might find a giant tortoise associated with the Galápagos Islands, designated *Testudo nigra*. In the case of artworks, curators might designate the medium, place and date of making, subject, and even supposed maker of a thing described broadly as sculpture. For instance, we might find a terracotta model for a sculpture made in Rome in 1658 by Gian Lorenzo Bernini representing Saint Ambrose. In these real cases, the *Testudo nigra* in the Harvard University Museum of Comparative Zoology is the internationally recognized holotype, the particular specimen that sets the standards for the unique characteristics all examples of that species. Its description is unlikely ever to change, its number—R-11064—never. The same is true for the Bernini terracotta sculptural model of *Saint Ambrose* in the Harvard Art Museums. Its permanent accession number is 1995.60, and will remain so even if scholars in the future change its attribution or description.

This system of categorization allows scholars—usually curators—to make knowledge claims about the specimens and artworks they study. The major problems with it are twofold. First, it is culturally specific, in that it embodies sets of assumptions about the nature of things and their relationships with one another that are characteristically and in some aspects exclusively Western. For many Indigenous peoples, for instance, things regarded by Westerners as inherently inanimate, or once living but now dead, are animate, and must be treated as such. Some things of this kind retain their sacred status in perpetuity, and must be treated appropriately. This is in spite of many Western museum scholars' assumptions that incorporation within their collections by means of the ritual practice of accession has definitively desacralized and secularized them. Such assumptions concern not only some Indigenous and subaltern things, but also some things from certain European societies, such as Orthodox Christian icons. Second, the taxonomic tree is relatively inflexible and unadaptable. It accommodates new ideas about things with difficulty, especially those that relate to claims concerning their multivalency, and the multiplicity of their roles in various societies and across time. Even if things have fixed physical characteristics, which is not invariably the case—as decay, for instance, makes plain—they do not have fixed uses, let alone meanings. Museum categorization, strictly institutionalized, does not respond well to claims regarding the ambiguity, uncertainty, or multiplicity and shifts of significance of things. It is unwieldy, and relatively unresponsive. This is so, even though organizational rearrangement takes place in long-lived museums from time to time in attempts to accommodate revised conceptions of the things in their care.

None of these taxonomic matters has received adequate or even peremptory philosophical attention. Much the same can be said of the topic that categorization prompts us to consider: the distinctive epistemology of museum scholarship.



### 1.3. Epistemology

Several academic commentators on museums have credibly claimed that museums of all kinds—by which they mean *hegemonic* museums of all kinds—have lost their scholarly standing at base not because of a decline in standards, or diversion of talent to universities and other research institutions (though these may have occurred) but because of a fundamental epistemic shift. They contend that the consideration of abstractions tested, where appropriate, by experimentation as distinct from observation, has superseded a process of knowledge establishment proceeding from first-hand, close examination of and comparison among tangible things. (There are exceptions: the observation of extraterrestrial phenomena remains essential to astronomy and its related disciplines.) In the course of the nineteenth century, even as museums were gaining their characteristic and enduring form, the empirical principles of observation, description, and comparison based on *a priori* principles, derived, to a greater or lesser extent, from antecedent inductive reasoning (such as the Linnaean systematization of living things) increasingly gave way to the testing of hypotheses by physical experimentation; that is, human physical intervention by contriving dynamic courses of events as opposed to the ostensibly unintrusive and disinterested registering of the states of affairs of things. The emergence of psychology in the later nineteenth century cast doubt on the essential objectivity and disinterestedness of the observer. This development undermined the epistemological status of museums more than that of fields such as experimental science and anthropology, for museum scholars were not able to propose and develop qualifications (such as the idea of the participant observer) that partially allayed the doubts of at least some of the new skeptics. Some of them, including William James, had experience of museum scholarship. James came to hold that the very process of observation itself affects the result of any empirical attempt to establish veracity owing to the inseparability of the mind, its experiences, and nature.<sup>16</sup> While still a student, he had participated in the Thayer Expedition to Brazil in 1865-66, led by the founder of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, Louis Agassiz.<sup>17</sup> Even then, his praise of Agassiz was ambivalent. In a letter from Brazil to his father, he wrote: “No one sees farther into a generalization than his [Agassiz’s] knowledge of details extends, and you have a greater feeling of weight and solidity about the movement of Agassiz’s mind, owing to the continual presence of this great background of special facts, than about the mind of any other man I know.” Yet the sentence immediately preceding reads: “I have profited a great deal by hearing Agassiz talk, not so much by what he says, for never did a man utter a greater amount of

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<sup>16</sup> William Brandom, “From German Idealism to American Pragmatism—and Back,” The William James Centennial Lecture, delivered at Harvard University, December 3, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> See *Brazil through the Eyes of William James: Letters, Diaries, and Drawings, 1865-1866*, ed. Maria Helena P.T. Machado (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2006). See also Ivan Gaskell, “‘Making a World’: The Impact of Idealism on Museum Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts,” *The Impact of Idealism*, ed. Nicholas Boyle, & al., vol. 2 *Historical, Social and Political Thought* (Cambridge, U.K. and New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

humbug, but by learning the way of feeling of such a vast practical engine as he is.”<sup>18</sup> Here we see particular “knowledge of details” and of “special facts,” which are the province of the museum scholar, already on their way to marginalization.

“Knowledge of details” and “special facts” derived from observation constitute the groundwork of classification. Steven Conn points out: “The ideal museum builders hoped to achieve was ... to impose a stability and order on bodies of knowledge and to reflect and produce changes in that knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> That is, the epistemological structure of the bodies of knowledge produced by museums was and remains such that change occurs only by almost exclusively incremental means, and is a matter of refinement. That structure in which, as Conn remarks, objects function “as synecdoches standing for bodies of knowledge,” does not readily permit—let alone encourage—radical or fundamental alteration or even revision.

The ossification—or amenability to mere tinkering—to which the dominant museological epistemological structure is subject is enormously exacerbated by the practice for which museums are best known: exhibition. As Conn points out: “That knowledge could be obtained by anyone who visited a museum and studied the objects, provided the museum curators arranged the displays systematically.”<sup>20</sup> Many commentators believe that the aims and constraints of display lead it almost invariably to be a clog on alert, adaptable, and radical thinking. They assume display invariably characterizes museums, dominating their entire practice to the exclusion of all else. We should be cautious. While most museums of all kinds engage in exhibition, and while considerations concerning exhibition, both long-term and temporary, are both pervasive and consistently affect other museum activities, exhibition is but one of those activities. It is not necessarily even the most important. Indeed, that it should appear so, and that all commentators tacitly assume it to be so without question, indicates the huge problems that museums face in terms of both perception and practice as sites of scholarship. Regrettably, those few philosophers who discuss museums focus on their exhibition functions alone. For instance, in her three books on museums, Hilde Hein looks at little else.<sup>21</sup> The same can be said of David Carrier in his book *Museum Skepticism*.<sup>22</sup> These works are full of useful observations. Those of Carrier on the large number of Continentally informed theorists and others who describe museums as little more than instruments of social regulation—which, like universities, they are—are especially acute. Yet, like universities, museums are much more besides. And—crucially—they are much more than exhibiting institutions.

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<sup>18</sup> William James to Henry James, Sr., September 12-17, 1865, William James Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University; quoted in Edward Lurie, *Louis Agassiz: A Life in Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 347.

<sup>19</sup> Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>20</sup> Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life*, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Hilde S. Hein, *The Exploratorium: The Museum as Laboratory* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990); Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000); Hilde S. Hein, *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> David Carrier, *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

Concern with display alone now extends to consideration of museum buildings themselves. Hein, for instance, invites us to consider museum buildings as themselves art, which thereby contribute to the shaping of public discussion.<sup>23</sup> A great deal has been published on recent museum architecture, but little of it is by philosophers, with the notable exception of Larry Shiner's contributions.<sup>24</sup> That new museums and extensions to existing museums should garner attention from so many (except philosophers) is scarcely surprising, given their prominence in the urban fabric in many places worldwide. These range from Riehen, near Basel, Switzerland (Fondation Beyeler, 1997), to Nouméa, New Caledonia (Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Center, 1991-98), to San Francisco (California Academy of Sciences, 2008), to cite just three of the many museum institutions built or rebuilt by just one celebrity architectural practice, Renzo Piano Building Workshop of Genoa. Museums have become the ultimate prestige projects for architects. As Hein points out, these structures have become foci of attention in their own right, irrespective of their contents. Some architects clearly subordinate the function of the building to their own aesthetic and other ambitions. The 2006 Frederic C. Hamilton building of the Denver Art Museum by Studio Daniel Libeskind, with its eccentrically angled walls, is an oft-cited notorious example. Yet it is no more impractical than the building that might be said to be the prototype of what Shiner calls the "spectacle museum": Frank Lloyd Wright's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, which opened in 1959. The tendency of commentators to discuss such buildings in relation to their museum functions in terms of the display of collections alone (sometimes as failing, as in Denver; sometimes as succeeding, as in Riehen) intensifies the myopia they and others exhibit with respect to the many other functions of museums. A consequence has been a reinforcement of the epistemological shift, and a confirmation of the loss of authority suffered by museums. This change has affected the teleology of museums of every kind, as will be explored in Part II.

It would be imprudent to draw any conclusions halfway through a two-part study, yet certain points are worth reiterating at this stage. Everyone affected by museums—and that includes a great deal of people in communities throughout the world—would surely benefit from philosophical attention to the huge variety of institutions gathered under this term. Perhaps in the nineteenth century museums were too self-evident as sites of scholarship to attract philosophical attention, whereas in the twentieth and beyond their precipitate fall from epistemological grace rendered has them irrelevant. Nonetheless, they continue to present philosophical challenges beyond those to do with cultural variety, taxonomy, and epistemology. I shall address some of these further issues—teleology, ethics, therapeutics, and aesthetics—in Part II.

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<sup>23</sup> Hein, *Public Art*.

<sup>24</sup> Larry Shiner, "Architecture vs. Art: The Aesthetics of Art Museum Design," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 5, 2007, at [www.contemporaryaesthetics.org](http://www.contemporaryaesthetics.org); Larry Shiner, "On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture: The Case of the 'Spectacle' Museum," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, 2011, pp. 31-41. Glenn Parsons discusses Daniel Libeskind's 2007 extension to the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto in his "Fact and Function in Architectural Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, 2011, pp. 21-29.

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### *Short Biography*

Ivan Gaskell is Professor of Cultural History, and of Museum Studies at the Bard Graduate Center, New York City. He has extensive curatorial experience, mostly at Harvard University where he remains Research Associate of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. His many publications include *Vermeer's Wager: Speculations on Art History, Theory, and Art Museums*, and six co-edited books in the series *Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts*. He has made numerous contributions to journals and edited volumes, and has curated many experimental exhibitions, mostly at Harvard.